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ABSTRACT

Asserting that problems arising within the family may lead to children's problem behaviors, this bulletin from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention describes Parents Anonymous, Inc., a program designed to enhance the capability of families to help their children. The oldest national child abuse prevention organization, Parents Anonymous is dedicated to strengthening families through innovative strategies that promote mutual support and parent leadership. The bulletin recounts the creation of Parents Anonymous by a concerned mother and her social worker, summarizes its structure, and describes key program components. A typical weekly meeting is then detailed, and examples of Parents Anonymous programs are provided. (EV)

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Parents Anonymous[SM]: Strengthening Families

Family Strengthening Series

Juvenile Justice Bulletin

Teresa Rafael and Lisa Pion-Berlin

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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Justice Programs
Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention

OJJDP
Shay Bilchik, Administrator — April 1999
JUVENILE JUSTICE BULLETIN

Parents Anonymous℠: Strengthening Families

Teresa Rafael, M.S.W., and Lisa Pion-Berlin, Ph.D.

The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) is dedicated to preventing and reversing trends of increased delinquency and violence among adolescents. These trends have alarmed the public during the past decade and challenged the juvenile justice system. It is widely accepted that increases in delinquency and violence over the past decade are rooted in a number of interrelated social problems—child abuse and neglect, alcohol and drug abuse, youth conflict and aggression, and early sexual involvement—that may originate within the family structure. The focus of OJJDP's Family Strengthening Series is to provide assistance to ongoing efforts across the country to strengthen the family unit by discussing the effectiveness of family intervention programs and providing resources to families and communities.

Parents Anonymous, Inc., the oldest national child abuse prevention organization, is dedicated to strengthening families through innovative strategies that promote mutual support and parent leadership. Founded in 1970 through the joint efforts of a courageous parent who sought help in providing a safe and caring home for her children and a social worker who believed that parents are their own best agents of change, Parents Anonymous, Inc., currently leads a dynamic national network of affiliated community-based groups with weekly meetings for parents and children. Each year, approximately 100,000[1] parents and their children come together in Parents Anonymous℠ groups to learn new skills, transform their attitudes and behaviors, and create long-term positive changes in their lives. These weekly groups are led by parents and professionally trained facilitators and are free of charge to participants. While the parents are meeting, their children are usually engaged in specialized programs to promote healthy growth and development, and free childcare is provided in sites in which these programs are unavailable. Many State and local Parents Anonymous℠ programs operate 24-hour telephone helplines to provide an immediate response to parents seeking help. Parents Anonymous℠ also raises awareness and educates the public on critical issues and community solutions and joins with community, State, and Federal policymakers to promote effective services for families across America.

Parents or adults in parenting roles (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, foster parents, stepparents, or older siblings) who are concerned about their parenting abilities and seeking support, information, and training are welcome at Parents Anonymous℠ groups, whatever the age of their children or their current

[1] Based on information provided by the national network.

From the Administrator

Problems arising within the family may lead to problem behaviors with adverse consequences for children and communities. Strengthening families is a fundamental principle of OJJDP's Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders, and this Bulletin provides information about a program that enhances the capability of families to help their children.

Parents Anonymous, Inc., leads a network of affiliated community-based groups that hold weekly meetings led by parents and professionally trained facilitators. This Bulletin describes how the organization works to strengthen families by promoting parent leadership, mutual support, shared leadership, and personal growth. Programs that support positive development are also offered for children.

The Bulletin tells the story of the creation of Parents Anonymous℠ by a concerned mother and her social worker, summarizes its structure, and describes key program components. A typical weekly meeting is detailed and examples of Parents Anonymous℠ programs are provided.

OJJDP has been partnering with Parents Anonymous, Inc., since 1994 to promote shared leadership and mutual support in ethnically and culturally diverse settings across the Nation. After reading this Bulletin, you will also appreciate their contribution to those worthy goals.

Shay Bilchik
Administrator

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One Mother's Search Leads to Help for Hundreds of Thousands of Parents

The story of Jolly K., the founding parent of Parents Anonymous℠, is one that has provided hope and inspiration to thousands of parents throughout the country. In 1970, Jolly was searching for help in providing a safe and caring home for her two daughters and was particularly worried about her behavior toward her 6-year-old daughter. After many fruitless attempts to locate help in changing her behavior, Jolly was finally assigned to the caseload of Leonard Lieber, a clinical social worker at a California State mental health clinic. Jolly and Leonard met in traditional therapy sessions for several months. When Jolly expressed frustration about her lack of progress, Leonard encouraged Jolly to suggest alternative solutions. Jolly realized that if she could meet with other parents with similar problems, they could explore solutions together.

She and Leonard met with other mothers with whom he was working and who were also seeking to improve their parenting abilities—Jolly led the discussion and Leonard served as a resource and facilitator. At the end of 2 hours, the parents attending this first meeting felt encouraged and hopeful and decided to continue meeting under the following guidelines:

- They would make a commitment to stop behaviors they deemed unacceptable or abusive.
- They would exchange telephone numbers and be available to each other day or night, especially in times of crisis.
- They would meet in donated space and would welcome, free of charge, any other parents who wanted to attend.

In Redondo Beach, CA, they placed the first advertisement in a local newspaper, "For Moms Who Lose Their Cool With Their Kids, Call . . . ." This gave birth to a national movement that has helped millions of parents and children all across America. Through their courage and tenacity, the parents in the first Parents Anonymous℠ group demonstrated that, by helping each other, they could find the strength to become the parents they wanted to be. Jolly and Leonard began to speak to community groups and the media. They and others told the story of the significant positive changes that were taking place in families when parents participated in Parents Anonymous℠ groups.

circumstances. Groups are ongoing and open ended; parents can join at any time and participate as long as they wish. Group participation is not restricted by age, educational level, income, problems experienced by the parents or children, or any other specific criteria. Because the groups are community based, participants mirror the ethnic, geographical, and cultural nature of their neighborhoods.

Parents Anonymous℠ responds to the diverse needs of families (married or single parents, stepparents, teenage parents, and divorced parents) by providing group meetings in neighborhood family centers, churches, clinics, schools, housing projects, prisons, homeless shelters, and Head Start centers. In addition, group members discuss parenting concerns in English, Spanish, French, and several Southeast-Asian and American Indian languages. A Parents Anonymous℠ group can become a valuable resource for any parent, regardless of culture or language, who is having difficulty providing a safe and caring home.

Organizational Structure

The National Network

Parents Anonymous, Inc., the national organization, is a private, nonprofit agency located in Claremont, CA. Through a variety of strategies and mechanisms, the organization provides training, technical assistance, materials, national media exposure, advocacy, national networking opportunities, and coordination of Parents Anonymous℠ programs at State and regional levels. Through local, city, county, and State partnerships, Parents Anonymous, Inc., selects, monitors, and assists a dynamic national network of organizations that share responsibility for promoting, maintaining, developing, and expanding programs in local areas.

These organizations provide volunteer management (including recruitment, screening, training, recognition, and evaluation), promote parent leadership, develop community-based groups, provide outreach to parents, and form close links with other resources and organizations in their communities. With regard to shared leadership, parents work with professionals in planning, implementing, and evaluating program services through prescriptive leadership roles. In addition, Parents Anonymous, Inc., is integrally involved in major national system reform initiatives addressing the need for change in the child protective services system and in other child welfare arenas. Through consultation, training, and technical assistance to local communities and public child welfare systems, Parents Anonymous, Inc., helps others understand and incorporate sound principles into their work with families and children to ensure responsive service planning, implementation, oversight, and evaluation.

National Parent Leadership Activities

In 1995, Parents Anonymous, Inc., developed the diverse National Parent Leadership Team, consisting of parents who demonstrated leadership in their local groups and organizations and who expressed an interest in expanding their leadership role. The leadership team provides training for professionals and other parents; participates in public education, outreach, and advocacy activities; and serves as the editorial board for *The Parent Networker* newsletter. The team advises Parents Anonymous, Inc., regarding program and organization issues that affect families and works with local, State, and national media to ensure that the voices of parents are heard on issues that are related to families and children. Based on the success of the national team, several State or local Parents Anonymous℠ organizations have developed parent leadership teams to accomplish similar goals locally.

Program Components

The Parent Group Leader

Based on the principle of shared leadership, each group must have a parent

leader who, in addition to being a group member, also serves as a cofacilitator of the group and promotes leadership among all group members. Other parent leadership activities may be shared so that multiple parents have the opportunity to practice and strengthen their leadership skills, which allows parents to give back to others and increase their self-esteem.

The Professionally Trained Facilitator

Each Parents Anonymous℠ group has a professionally trained facilitator who meets with the group each week and is available to the parent leader and other group members between meetings. The facilitator commits to working with the group for a minimum of 1 year and may be a volunteer given release time by his or her employer or paid a stipend. Facilitators bring a variety of skills and talents to their work with Parents Anonymous℠. They are primarily practicing professionals with expertise in social work, counseling, healthcare, mental health, teaching, or related fields. They possess personal characteristics that embody the principles of Parents Anonymous℠. They are knowledgeable about child abuse, juvenile delinquency, group dynamics, family systems, child development, and local community resources. Above all, they must be capable of working with parents in the unique Parents Anonymous℠ model of shared leadership and be flexible and accepting.

In addition, the facilitators are mandated to report child abuse and must be comfortable doing so to protect the safety of children in a way that continues to promote the strength of parents. When it is necessary to report child abuse, it is important for facilitators to focus on the parent's role in protecting his or her child, encourage the parent to self-report, and involve the parent with child protective services in any other way possible. This helps ensure that the parent continues to be responsible for the child's safety and well-being, even if it is necessary for the parent to ask for help from child protective services in fulfilling that role.

The facilitator is an integral part of the group. He or she serves as a role model, provides links to other community resources, and helps create a sense of safety and positive growth in the group. The nature of the facilitator's role differs significantly from the traditional role of human service professionals, in that it is based on a true partnership with parents and is designed to promote individual parent leadership and strengthen the functioning of the group.

Community-Based Volunteer Support

Volunteers make up the core support for programs by facilitating groups, operating children's programs, providing childcare, and answering telephone response lines. Moreover, volunteers provide their skill and expertise on boards of directors, fund-raising committees, and public relations campaigns. Their valuable assistance contributes to the cost effectiveness of the program and a high level of community ownership, supports local replication of the model, and ensures that parents and their children have access to Parents Anonymous℠ programs. Through volunteering, community members are given a vehicle with which to respond to the needs of their neighbors and to invest in strengthening families and children. Approximately 30,000 volunteers across the country donate an estimated $10 million worth of services annually.

Specialized Children's Programs

According to an annual database survey given to all Parents Anonymous℠ affiliates, specialized Parents Anonymous℠ children's programs help approximately 22,000 children and youth

The Parents Anonymous℠ Principles

Parents Anonymous℠ programs are based on the following four guiding principles:

- Parent Leadership. Parents recognize and take responsibility for their problems, develop their own solutions, and serve as role models for other parents.
- Mutual Support. Help is reciprocal, in that parents give and receive support from each other, creating a strong sense of community.
- Shared Leadership. Parents and professionals build successful partnerships to share responsibility, expertise, and leadership roles.
- Personal Growth. Parents make significant long-term positive change through identifying their options, exploring their feelings, and acting on their decisions in an atmosphere of belonging, trust, and acceptance in which healthy interactions are modeled.

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES ALL ACROSS AMERICA

PARENTS Anonymous℠

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gain problem-solving skills, increase their positive social interaction skills, and learn to better understand and manage their emotions. These activities lead to greater self-esteem and more positive interactions with others. Some programs also emphasize building other skills. In Oregon, for example, the programs teach drug and alcohol refusal skills to youth to prepare them to resist peer pressure. Because the children's programs are held in conjunction with the parent groups, the need for childcare is not a barrier to parental attendance. As noted before, sites without specialized programs offer free childcare.

Public Awareness and Outreach

Parents Anonymous, Inc., and its national network conduct public awareness activities and reach out to potential parent participants through news and feature coverage in local and national media; distribution of brochures, pamphlets, newsletters, and fliers; production and distribution of informational videos; and training programs for professionals in healthcare, social services, education, and other disciplines to encourage their referrals of parents. Parents reach out to other parents through public speaking, newspaper articles, and media interviews; share their successes; and encourage others to join or support Parents Anonymous℠ programs across the country.

Parents Anonymous℠ Helplines

Parents Anonymous, Inc., and its national network provide telephone helplines for parents seeking information and referral to local groups. These toll-free telephone services provide a necessary lifeline for parents seeking help. Annually, Parents Anonymous℠ provides immediate support and referrals to approximately 90,000 parents through Parents Anonymous℠ helplines.

Participant Profile

Parents Anonymous℠ is a viable resource for thousands of mothers and fathers—33 percent of the program participants are male, and 67 percent are female (see figure). Parents Anonymous℠ reaches out to families of color in local communities, including those on reservations, with an almost even split between Caucasian parents (51 percent) and all other groups combined (49 percent). The percentage of people of color in Parents Anonymous℠ groups far exceeds the racial/ethnic breakdown of the general U.S. population. Twenty-one percent of the participants are African-American, 22 percent are Hispanic, 5 percent are American Indian, and 1 percent are Asian/Pacific Islander. Parents Anonymous℠ programs integrate the values, languages, and strengths of local communities with a strong commitment to providing culturally responsive services that meet the diverse needs of the Nation's families. This commitment is demonstrated by the wide range of populations served and locations of groups. Twenty-six percent of all Parents Anonymous℠ groups serve specialized populations of parents, while 74 percent reach out to all parents in their target community.

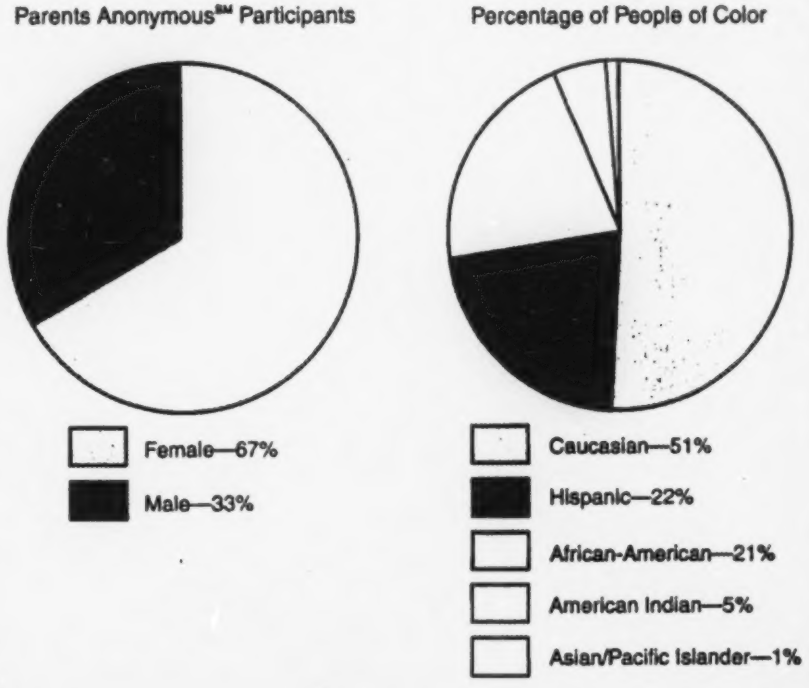
Parents join Parents Anonymous℠ groups for multiple reasons:

- They are seeking help because they want to change their behavior toward their children. This can range from parents who are feeling too much stress to parents who have harmed their children or fear they might harm them.
- A family member, friend, social worker, teacher, healthcare provider, daycare worker, religious leader, or other individual encouraged them to attend.
- They want help, information, and support in managing specific behavioral, health, or other issues facing their family.
- They are mandated by a court order or child protective services agreement to attend.

The Parents Anonymous℠ Group Model

To reduce the blame and shame parents sometimes experience, Parents Anonymous℠ offers help through support systems with other parents. Parents Anonymous℠ group members determine the content of each meeting, usually through formal agenda building at the beginning of each session, although multiple strategies may be employed. Thus, the topics discussed on any given day relate specifically to the needs and interests of the group members present. This allows

Breakdown of Participants



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A Typical Parents Anonymous℠ Meeting

It is sometimes easiest to understand a program when given an example to review. Below is an example of what a newcomer may experience when attending his or her first Parents Anonymous℠ group meeting.

When Karen starts to feel overwhelmed with her role as a parent, she knows that she needs help. A trusted friend tells her about Parents Anonymous℠ programs and Karen decides to attend a meeting. She leaves her two children in the care of a well-trained children's program worker and, after getting them settled, joins seven other parents and a facilitator to begin the 2-hour group meeting. No forms are handed out, no one insists that personal information be provided, and no fee is required to participate. The group meeting begins when one parent, the parent group leader, reads from an opening statement: "This Parents Anonymous℠ group is part of a national network of parents who support and encourage positive change and growth in family relationships. Any concerns will be discussed in a caring and supportive manner. Confidentiality and anonymity are to be respected, except when the health or safety of a family member is at risk."

Group members indicate the amount of time they need to discuss the issues they want to cover during the next 2 hours. All newcomers are invited to participate but also are assured that they may just listen. As parents talk about their individual situations, Karen gains an understanding of who they are, what brought them to Parents Anonymous℠, and what goals they hope to achieve. For example:

- Susan is a 19-year-old single mom with a 10-month-old baby. The baby's father is no longer involved in her life, and Susan is learning how to provide a safe and caring home for herself and her new baby. She has no immediate family members in the area and has little support or relief from the constant stress she feels. With the information and support she gains from the group, Susan feels more confident and has an extended network of other parents she can call during the week if she is unsure of herself or feels at the end of her rope. She has even enrolled in a nearby nursing school to pursue her dream of working in the medical field.
- Alishia and Robert, the only couple in the group, have three children; the oldest one, a 15-year-old, seems to have become a different person. Her normally sunny disposition and helpful nature have disappeared, and she is often surly, insolent, and angry. Susan has helped them understand the emotional changes teens experience, as she is only a few years away from being that same age. Alishia and Robert are learning to set limits while remaining empathetic with their daughter. Life at home has become much better for the entire family.
- Manuel is the father of two children, ages 6 and 10. He and his wife recently divorced, and Manuel realized he had a habit of leaving the job of parenting to his wife. Now that the children are with him on weekends, he must create a new relationship with them and help them deal with the pain and grief of the divorce. He wants to become a strong and competent parent even though he has limited time with his children. He knows they are angry and confused, and he also realizes how much he loves them and how important they are to him.
- Barbara is an outpatient in a drug-abuse treatment program. She participated in a Parents Anonymous℠ group during the 4-week, inpatient portion of the treatment program and joined this community group when she returned to her own neighborhood. As she gained a new awareness of her life beyond her use of drugs, she realized that her addiction had seriously impaired her ability to be a safe and caring parent to her children. She is determined to learn all she can in order to be the best parent she can be.
- Samantha is in the group because she lost control one day and struck her 11-year-old son, leaving a mark on his arm. His school counselor contacted child protective services (CPS), and when the CPS worker visited the home to assess the situation, she realized that this parent could benefit from the program and asked the judge to mandate that Samantha attend. Each week, for 3 months, Samantha asked the facilitator to sign an attendance form, which she gave to her social worker to demonstrate her compliance with the court order. After the mandated period was completed, she continued to attend and recently celebrated her second anniversary as a member.
- Randy attends because his oldest son was convicted of a misdemeanor. His son's probation worker stressed the importance of strong, positive parenting skills in helping the youth avoid future problems and recommended the program. Randy attends the group, and although his wife works evenings and is unable to participate, she supports Randy's involvement and learns from him. Thus far, their son has improved in his schoolwork and made new friends who are a more positive influence on him. Best of all, he is now a healthy role model for his two younger brothers. Randy has attended the group for a year and is the parent group leader.
- Maria is the group facilitator. She is a social worker, and her agency provides release time for her to meet with the group each week. Maria became a facilitator 2 years ago and finds it the most rewarding professional role she has ever held. She works closely with the parent group leader and encourages leadership among all the parents in the group. She serves as a resource to the parents during group meetings, and helps build links with other community services.

After listening to the discussion for an hour or so, Karen decides to share her concerns and finds that the group is supportive and has valuable information to share—some from their own experience and some learned in other settings. Several parents recommend resources they have found to be useful, and the facilitator encourages her to talk further with the parents who seem to be the most helpful to her.

At the end of the meeting, a list is passed around with names and telephone numbers on it, although providing this information is not mandatory. Susan tells Karen she'll call her to find out more about a suggestion Karen made—a method that helped her children get to sleep when they were the age of Susan's child.

As Karen leaves, she recognizes that her sense of helplessness has been replaced with hope, and fear with pride of accomplishment.

for valuable discussion because members often can share their own expertise in particular areas with other members seeking assistance. The group model capitalizes on the learning style of adults—adults learn best when they perceive they need to know about a topic, and adult learning is reinforced when a new skill can be practiced immediately and ongoing support and feedback are available to promote long-term change.

At Parents Anonymous℠ meetings, parents discuss communication, discipline, child development, parental roles, effective strategies for helping children achieve independence and self-control, methods for successfully dealing with the everyday stresses of parenting, and any other issues that affect their parenting behavior. Parents Anonymous℠ is equally as appropriate for parents who are under stress and need information and support as for parents who have experienced difficulties requiring professional intervention from child protective services or courts. Because all aspects of parents' lives may affect their relationship with their children, all relevant topics are open for discussion. To reinforce and solidify their new skills, parents practice new behaviors at home and discuss the results at the meeting each week. Attitudes dramatically change and form the basis for integrating new knowledge and skills, helping parents to successfully foster the healthy growth and development of their children.

Parents are given an opportunity to experience the safety and caring of the group, to be trusted and to know others who are trustworthy, and to take charge of their lives and their families while knowing that the group members will be available to help them as needed. Parents find an environment where they can talk about their serious concerns and specific events and behaviors that may be problematic. In this setting, new behaviors are learned and incorporated into daily life. Through the mutual support of the group, parents grow stronger by developing new self-images that are positive, capable, and responsible.

Through interactions with their peers, parents identify their options, examine their attitudes toward childrearing, and learn positive ways of relating to their children. Group members and the facilitator also exchange telephone numbers; this offers 24-hour support to parents when they experience a crisis or stress. The strong peer connections parents build within the group often are reinforced through telephone calls and other personal contacts outside the group. The foundation of the group is reciprocity—in addition to receiving help from the group, every parent has the opportunity to offer help to other group members and become a leader. Parents who reach out and provide help thus benefit as much as or more than the parents who receive their assistance.

When necessary, courts mandate parents to attend parenting classes; Parents Anonymous℠ is one resource. The mutual support environment of a Parents Anonymous℠ group has been proven effective in reducing resistance and breaking through denial of the need for personal change.

Becoming a parent is a major developmental transition for anyone. In an ideal world, all young people would grow up in nurturing, supportive homes with positive role models who would fully prepare them to be loving and responsible parents to their own children. Unfortunately, reality for many is very different. Many parents are still struggling to reconcile issues related to their own development and may be so overwhelmed with their own needs and fears that they are unable to focus as much as necessary on meeting their children's needs. If a parent's self-image is still that of a child who needs approval, support, and acceptance, it is unlikely that information about positive parenting techniques will elicit significant change. If anything, parents may feel rage, grief, and loss about their childhoods as they learn more about what is necessary for the well-being of children. Parents with many unmet needs may not be motivated to attend a parenting class. They may need to understand the benefits to their own lives in order to participate.

Parents Anonymous℠ addresses these issues by providing a safe and supportive place in which parents can unload excess emotional baggage from their life experiences so that they can focus on their role as parents and the joys and responsibilities inherent in that role. Once that transition takes place, parents are often ready and eager for help and support as they work to become more effective caregivers. Furthermore, many parents find Parents Anonymous℠ a valuable resource following participation in structured, time-limited parent education classes.

Barriers to Change

Much is known about risk factors facing parents and children and about ways to develop the protective factors that can overcome the impact of risk factors. However, risk factors often present a barrier to obtaining support and taking advantage of educational opportunities. For example, the following challenges—often faced by families involved in public child welfare systems and the courts—also can be barriers to seeking and using the help that is available:

- Social and emotional isolation.
- Lack of assurance about what is "normal," perhaps leading to harsh self-judgment, self-protectiveness, or fear of speaking out.
- Family rules about keeping secrets and lack of trust in others.
- Lack of resources.
- High stress and frequent crisis situations.
- Lack of awareness of options for change, and lack of hope in the possibility of change.
- Exposure to people who inappropriately use power and control, which leads to a sense of helplessness and lack of trust in authority figures.
- Unmet needs from one's own childhood.

All Parents Anonymous℠ programs are confidential unless the health or

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safety of a child is at risk. Based on State law, Parents Anonymous℠ facilitators are required to report suspected child abuse and neglect. It is the policy of Parents Anonymous℠ that parents are always made aware of the reporting requirements when they attend their first Parents Anonymous℠ group. In those situations serious enough to warrant a report, concerns are initially discussed with the parent involved, who is encouraged and supported in making a self-report. If he or she is unwilling or unable to do so, the facilitator will make the report and will continue to provide support to the parent. Suspected situations of child abuse and neglect may be identified when:

- A parent discloses a particular concern about his or her behavior.
- An emerging pattern of behavior leads to concern about a parent's ability to cope in a healthy way with the stresses of parenthood.
- A child in childcare exhibits signs of or verbally reports abuse or neglect.

The need to make a report provides an opportunity to promote the parent's role, responsibilities, and power in managing his or her interaction with the child by keeping the parent involved in the process as much as possible. The child's safety is always the primary concern, but parents are encouraged to participate in the report, including making a self-report when appropriate.

Positive Outcomes for Families

One goal of Parents Anonymous℠ is to prevent or end juvenile delinquency and child abuse problems in families. To reach this goal, parents learn that it is a sign of strength to ask for help. They learn to use appropriate community resources and to build supportive, positive peer relationships for themselves and their children. They learn to establish reciprocal relationships, which helps them maintain positive peer associations and avoid overburdening the friends and family members who make up their personal support system. Parents gain a sense of their own power and use it to improve their ability to care for their children, avoid violent reactions to their children, protect them from violence inflicted by other adults, and use parenting practices that promote healthy outcomes for their children.

Benefits of Having a Parents Anonymous℠ Group in Your Community

- Families will have free, immediate access to ongoing, long-term support and education based on their own identified need for help.
- Parents will learn new communication skills, discipline techniques, and effective parenting strategies.
- Parents, as their own agents of change, will develop a personal support system through a network of parents who assist each other with everyday needs.
- Parents will be in charge of their own growth and development and can participate for as long as they find it useful.
- Parents will have an opportunity to develop their leadership abilities and become stronger leaders in their homes and in the community.
- Children will have access to a program that is structured to develop self-esteem, teach cooperative play, and build confidence.
- Professionals in the fields of juvenile justice, health, education, and social service will gain an excellent, cost-effective ongoing resource for families with whom they work.
- Professionals who facilitate groups will gain training and experience in working in true partnership with families through the Parents Anonymous℠ model of shared leadership.
- Communities will create effective programs for families in need, and volunteers will benefit from the opportunity to support and strengthen families through their efforts.
- Program participants, volunteers, and staff will have the opportunity to join with thousands of their peers across the country by participating in the national network and benefiting from training, materials, consultation, and numerous other activities designed to strengthen their community programs.

Demonstrated Effectiveness of Parents Anonymous℠

Research suggests that Parents Anonymous℠ is a promising approach to strengthening families and preventing child abuse and neglect, although only a small number of studies have been conducted. Behavior Associates (1976) administered a one-time survey to 613 program participants and asked them a range of questions about their self-esteem, feelings about parenthood and children, satisfaction derived from parenthood, knowledge of child development, social contacts and use of community resources, frequency and severity of abuse, perceived benefits of membership in the program, and background characteristics.

Participants reported improved parenting behavior, an immediate reduction in physical abuse, a positive change in physical and verbal interactions with their children, improved self-esteem, increased social contacts, more help-seeking behavior, and greater use of community facilities for childcare. Also, it was found that participants' expectations of children's behavior became more developmentally appropriate. The findings suggest that these positive results are more pronounced as time spent in the program increases.

A second study found that Parents Anonymous℠ is a key element in service delivery plans for parents (Cohn, 1979). This study used data collected from case managers who were asked a variety of questions about their clients when they began and terminated services. Case managers were asked to rate their clients on a variety of parental attitudes, situations, and behaviors thought to be causally related to child abuse and neglect (e.g., parental stress, having a sense of the child as a person, appropriate behavior toward the child, and knowledge of child development). At service termination, case manager reports indicated that parents who participated in Parents Anonymous℠ were more likely to improve on these measures than those who

Two Examples of Parents Anonymous℠ Programs

Juanita Chávez, M.S.W., A.C.S.W.

Parents Anonymous℠ Serving Hispanic Families in East Los Angeles

The majority of people who live in East Los Angeles are Mexican, and theirs is one of the oldest Mexican communities in the United States. Residents include recent immigrants (documented and undocumented) and members of families who have been in this country for two, three, four, or more generations. Many families settled in this area long ago and remained here, often with several generations living in the same community. In addition to the Mexican and Salvadoran residents residing in the immediate area, Salvadoran residents from downtown Los Angeles also use the culturally relevant services in East Los Angeles.

Some immigrant parents do not understand the laws regarding child protection and may become involved with child welfare agencies or law enforcement officials regarding their treatment of their children, particularly around the use of disciplinary practices. This creates resentment and a sense that their role as parents is being undermined by outside influences. Because some immigrants are undocumented, there is the additional fear that the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) will deport them if they become involved with public social service agencies or law enforcement.

Poverty is another issue facing many families in East Los Angeles. Parents who are undocumented immigrants often must work in jobs that pay less than the minimum wage. In many families, including those of immigrants and long-term residents, both parents are wage earners, but the family income remains at or below the poverty level. It is not unusual for older children to have jobs to help support their families. To stretch their resources, several generations often live together in one house.

Parents Anonymous, Inc., has joined with a social service agency located in East Los Angeles to provide a Parents Anonymous℠ program there. Most of the agency's employees are bilingual and bicultural, and many are intimately familiar with the community.

The agency initially provided parent education classes, and staff members observed that some parents attended several sequential series of classes. After talking with them, the staff realized that these parents were using the classes to meet their long-term needs for support and continued growth as they made critical changes in their lives. Parents reported they preferred not to repeat parent education classes, because of the structure and fixed curriculum, but it was their only option for involvement with others.

In response to the needs of families in the community, a Spanish-speaking Parents Anonymous℠ group was developed and based at the affiliated social service agency, which is located near public transportation and has ample room for both the parent group and the children's program. The children's program is provided by agency staff. Parents Anonymous, Inc., provides training, program materials, outreach and referral, and ongoing support for the program.

Other agency staff refer parents they work with to the Parents Anonymous℠ program. In addition, the agency uses culturally appropriate outreach and recruitment materials and distributes them in schools and the community. All materials clearly state that the Parents Anonymous℠ program is conducted in Spanish.

Parents Anonymous℠ Serving American Indian Families in Montana

Montana has seven reservations that are home to several different Indian tribes. Unemployment on these reservations is as high as 89 percent, with the result that most families live below the poverty level. To pursue greater job opportunities, parents often have to leave the reservation and their extended family, so the cost of remaining close to family members can be very high. Inadequate housing is another major issue facing many families. Sometimes, several generations of one family live in a small house that may not have indoor

Continued on next page

did not participate. The researchers did caution that parents may self-select into this self-help service (the study was not able to study the effects of motivation), but also suggest that the nature of the service helps parents resolve important problems.

OJJDP and Parents Anonymous, Inc., have recognized the need to conduct an updated, rigorous evaluation of the program. In 1999, OJJDP will sponsor a national evaluation of Parents Anonymous℠ and build on the findings of past research. Important advances in evaluating Parents Anonymous℠ will include collecting information from multiple sources, conducting postprogram followups on participants, and using a comparison group.

Additional Relevant Research

Research on mutual assistance-shared leadership groups such as Parents Anonymous℠ has revealed that such groups are a more effective intervention strategy than pure self-help or traditional therapy. For example, Yoak and Chesler (1985) found that mutual assistance groups with shared leadership enjoyed greater longevity than groups led by a single individual, either a professional or a parent member. Borkman (1990), one of the major theorists and researchers in the area of mutual assistance groups, stated that increased access to and availability of self-help groups are important to promote for the public, especially for ethnic/racial minority groups and the economically disadvantaged.

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plumbing, electricity, or other conveniences that are common outside the reservation. Given the high level of stress, it is not unusual for families to move from house to house because of intrafamilial conflicts. In addition, as in the general population, issues regarding substance abuse cause stress in the American Indian community.

This Parents Anonymous℠ program began when a social worker, acting as a community organizer, identified key leaders in the community and invited them to a 2-day conference to develop responses to the needs of families on Montana reservations. She worked closely with tribal chiefs and elders and used her own familial contacts and those of her colleagues to build stronger connections between attendees. Because of her age and life experience, the community organizer is a respected elder, and this increases her credibility. Thus, development of the Parents Anonymous℠ program gained significant benefit from the support of elders, chiefs, and tribal councils. More than 250 participants attended the conference and agreed to work together to create additional programs to help strengthen families.

Tribal councils are significantly involved in the development of local Parents Anonymous℠ groups in Montana. For example, they help identify locations that will be most inviting for parents. By their involvement, they sanction Parents Anonymous℠ groups in their communities. Other (mostly government) agencies that are working with American Indian families are excellent referral sources. Parents Anonymous℠ also helps families use other services. Because of these close relationships, staff cooperate with each other and with families to help coordinate available services and to ensure that Parents Anonymous℠ continues to be recognized as a vital community resource.

On one reservation, a healthcare clinic sponsors the Parents Anonymous℠ group through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The group meets in a local Catholic church, but the facilitators are employees of the clinic. The program also provides meals for both parents and children. This use of the traditional "breaking of the bread" is an excellent strategy to recruit and retain families.

For American Indian families in Montana, cultural norms regarding elders as leaders sometimes create discomfort regarding formal identification of parent group members as parent leaders. Therefore, the Parents Anonymous℠ model is implemented with a change in title for the parent group leader; while maintaining a high commitment to the principle of parent leadership, parent leaders may use the title "parent helper" instead.

The high level of poverty makes it hard to recruit volunteers for the program. Many members of the community are so focused on meeting their basic needs that they have little time or energy to commit to volunteer work. Mostly, agency staff and tribal council staff facilitate each group. Moreover, paid staff provide childcare and limited transportation to group meetings and to other family-oriented cultural events on the reservations.

Among the American Indian families living on reservations in Montana, cultural norms dictate a reluctance to seem too intrusive to another person by maintaining direct eye contact. To encourage parents to attend, and to lessen the need for constant eye contact, American Indian groups in Montana incorporate many creative activities into their meetings. For example, a group on the Blackfoot Reservation quilts and sews together while they discuss their children and families. This activity gives parents something to look at, lessens eye contact, and thereby avoids feelings of intrusiveness.

Also, as many people know each other so well, they are often already aware of the primary issues each family is facing and may know each other's family members. For example, a parent may make a brief statement, sometimes using only the first name of a child, "Georgie." Another parent may acknowledge they understand what the first parent is thinking and support them by saying, "Ah, that Georgie." Still another parent might join in the conversation and say, "My Michael is doing the same thing." Each member of the group may be fully aware of the concerns felt by the other parents. Then, a fourth parent might say, "When my child had this problem, this is what I did . . . ." Because the group meets in a very small community where people know a lot about each other's lives, they do not need to say much to each other to share their feelings and information.

Parents Anonymous℠ and OJJDP: A Vital Partnership

Parents Anonymous, Inc., and the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) began working together in 1994 to advance the Parents Anonymous℠ model of shared leadership and mutual support in ethnically and culturally diverse settings throughout the country because strengthening families is the first principle of OJJDP's *Comprehensive Strategy for Serious, Violent, and Chronic Juvenile Offenders* (Wilson and Howell, 1993). Parents Anonymous℠ has become a valuable partner in working toward that goal. The OJJDP publication *Family Life, Delinquency, and Crime: A Policymaker's Guide* (Wright and Wright, 1995) focuses on the following points:

- Positive parenting practices appear to act as buffers by preventing delinquent behavior and assisting adolescents involved in such behavior to avoid continued delinquency.
- Children raised in supportive, affectionate, and accepting homes are less likely to become deviant.
- Children who are rejected by their parents, grow up in homes with considerable conflict, are abused, or are inadequately supervised are at greatest risk of becoming delinquents.
- Children's behavior has a role in this dynamic, in that children who are troublesome are more likely to be rejected by parents, creating an escalating cycle that may lead to delinquency.

- The presence of a capable mother who is self-confident and affectionate and who has leadership skills provides a buffer against delinquency.

Research demonstrates that strengthening families is an essential component in the effort to prevent juvenile delinquency. By supporting the expansion of Parents Anonymous℠, OJJDP has helped ensure that many more families have access to this promising program. Through its partnership with OJJDP, Parents Anonymous℠ has made important progress toward reducing the risk of juvenile delinquency by:

- Developing new groups that focus on serving families of color, and developing more than 40 new programs in the Parents Anonymous℠ national network in such diverse settings as Head Start centers and prisons that focus on strengthening families and children.
- Providing intensive public awareness and outreach to thousands of parents, professionals, and volunteers through national and local print and electronic media.
- Conducting site visits, focus groups, written surveys, and intensive telephone interviews with successful programs serving families of color to identify the best practices for developing groups in diverse settings and publishing and disseminating a new manual, *Strategies for Best Practice*, that incorporates those findings.
- Increasing the ethnic and cultural diversity of the National Parent Leadership Team membership to ensure a stronger voice for parents who represent a wide variety of backgrounds and experiences.
- Creating a families-of-color task force consisting of parent and professional representatives from the national network who meet regularly to assist with planning, implementing, and evaluating programs and materials for families of color.
- Producing and distributing new publications such as a media bulletin and a program bulletin and publishing relevant articles in *Innovations* and *The Parent Networker*, newsletters distributed to thousands of parents, professionals, policymakers, and advocates throughout the country.
- Convening two Parents Anonymous℠ national leadership conferences, an executive directors' meeting, and two regional conferences (in Georgia and Arizona)—all offering an intensive focus on promoting, maintaining, developing, and expanding Parents Anonymous℠ programs.
- Developing closer working relationships with Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) programs and with local courts working with children and families.

In 1996, the University of Utah selected Parents Anonymous℠ as a model family strengthening program to prevent juvenile delinquency. The program was highlighted through workshops and a plenary presentation at two national Strengthening America's Families conferences at which community representatives were encouraged to develop new local programs. In addition, Parents Anonymous℠ is a member of OJJDP's National Training and Technical Assistance Center and a resource for sites participating in OJJDP initiatives.

Conclusion

Parents Anonymous, Inc., was created to provide training, technical assistance, and consultation to States, communities, agencies, and individuals with an interest in replicating the Parents Anonymous℠ model in their local communities. Professionals who seek effective models for strengthening families and who believe in the power of parents to be their own agents for change have become involved in local programs. Thousands of these professionals have gained significant benefit from their work with parents, transforming their beliefs, perspectives, and direct practice methods of strengthening families by being more responsive and supportive to parents. These professionals regard their involvement in Parents Anonymous℠ as one of their most challenging and rewarding experiences. Today, Parents Anonymous, Inc., continues to lead a dynamic national network of programs that was built on one mother's legacy and that reaches out to parents across America.

For Further Information

For further information, contact Parents Anonymous, Inc., 675 West Foothill Boulevard, Suite 220, Claremont, CA 91711, 909–621–6184, 909–625–6304 (fax), Parentsanon@MSN.com (e-mail), www.parentsanonymous-natl.org.

The following publications and resources are available for free (individual copies):

- ***Innovations.*** The Parents Anonymous℠ organizational newsletter distributed throughout the national network and to other professionals, organizations, policymakers, and parents.
- ***The Parent Networker.*** A newsletter published twice each year by and for parents that is distributed to all parents participating in Parents Anonymous℠ groups.
- ***Strengthening Families in Partnership With Communities.*** A general information brochure that provides an overview of Parents Anonymous℠ principles and the program model (1997).

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The following publications are available for $15 each:

- ***Parent Leadership: A Voice for Change.*** A media bulletin designed for parents, professionals, and community volunteers who want to use the media and public speaking opportunities as a means to reach out to other parents, educate the community, and help shape policies affecting families and children (1997).
- ***Parents Anonymous: The Model for Effective Parent Education.*** A program bulletin to help professionals, volunteers, and parents use the program in the best way possible (1997).

The following publications are provided only to recognized Parents Anonymous℠ programs:

- ***I Am a Parents Anonymous℠ Parent.*** A handbook given to all parents who attend Parents Anonymous℠ groups (1998).
- ***Manual for Group Facilitators.*** A manual used in training group facilitators that provides an indepth discussion of the program model, the roles of the facilitator and parent group leader, issues of group development, and clinical issues that may arise in a group (1993).
- ***The Parent Group Leader.*** A brief introduction to the role of the parent group leader (1993).
- ***Strategies for Best Practice.*** A useful manual for developing Parents Anonymous℠ groups; it highlights strategies that respond to the unique strengths and needs of individual communities (1997).
- ***Strengthening America's Families.*** A video that captures the success stories of several Parents Anonymous℠ families who have demonstrated enormous courage and tenacity to change their lives (1996).

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